

Stepping out from the Indie shadow

Independent Insurance recruited and trained a talented workforce and after the insurer's collapse many went on to become key industry players. **Chris Wheal** tracks them down

"All the time you were working at Indie, you felt you were working with good people," says Marc Don Francesco, a former communications and planning manager at Independent Insurance and now with Towergate. Many of his fellow Indie workers have gone on to great things, but it didn't always seem that was going to happen.

Alan Clarke, now managing director of Insurance Compliance Services (ICS), was one of the four founders of Independent Insurance. He left early in 1999 and retired as general manager, but was asked to come back on the board and stayed until 2001.

He is still bitter about the way people were treated when liquidator PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) suddenly sacked 1,000 UK workers.

"When it went to do the same thing in France and Spain their governments stepped in and said: 'No you can't do that,' and insisted on giving staff the statutory 90 days. Why haven't we got those laws in this country? The money was there to pay PWC for six years. There would have been enough to pay for the 90 days in the UK," Clarke insists.

"Losing your job is never great, but most people have redundancy pay and a notice period. These people lost everything virtually overnight. They had their mobile phones and laptops taken away and they lost all their savings, as they had invested in the company's share scheme.

"These people had been well paid and had big mortgages on the basis that their share schemes would mature and they'd be able to pay them off. Suddenly there was confusion. I had phone calls from people saying they didn't know how they were going to put bread on the table," says Clarke.

People were in danger of losing everything. With no job or office or communication, staff had no contacts to call and no grapevine to listen to. Getting another job, in what was not a job-seeker's market at the time, was going to be doubly hard.

"I knew from my retirement how easy it is to lose contact with people," Clarke says.

He felt he should try to help. "I had no intention of going back to work, but when it all happened and I saw that most of the senior staff I had recruited were on the street, I decided to set up the ex-Indie staff website.

"I was getting 300-400 hits a day. I didn't have the technology to have automated replies, so I was staying up until three or four in the morning trying to reply to everyone," says Clarke.

His website helped many people to find work, but not all. That led to his next venture.

Talking to human resources staff who had not found work led to setting up HR Experts.

"Brokers didn't have HR departments, so we set up to provide external support. As soon as we started talking to brokers about competency and training →



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Alan Clarke, Insurance Compliance Services

→ they realised that this was what the new rules from the General Insurance Standards Council were saying, and we found ourselves doing more compliance.

"Having set up HR Experts in September 2001, we set up ICS in March 2002," says Clarke. Several ex-Indie staff still work there, including Barry Woodward and Neil Williams.

Andy Hawkes, Indie's e-commerce and marketing manager, had a success story too. "I was there at the bitter end, in the room when the liquidation was put to the judge," he remembers.

But Hawkes says many in the industry were happy to recruit Indie staff. "I still believe that

Indie had the best collection of individuals any company has had or will have for a very long time," he insists.

"We took people from other companies and trained them to be the best at their job. Most insurance companies would like to have some of the business ideas the Indie had and numerous staff went on to senior management roles in underwriting or supply services. Several set up their own businesses.

"Many of the things we started are still the way companies manage their relationships with brokers now."

Hawkes went to St Paul in Redhill in an e-commerce and risk management role, then

to Rarrigini and Rosso (R&R) before setting up on his own. He spent nine months planning Evolution Underwriting.

Vic Thompson, of Thompson, Heath and Bond (THB), struck a deal to help fund Evolution if Hawkes came in to THB to run the ex-R&R business. Now Hawkes not only runs that and the expanded side of that business, but is chief executive of THB UK.

Hawkes remains a large shareholder in Evolution, which still has several ex-Indie staff, such as Paul Upton, running the show. Several more Indie staff went off to establish M4 Underwriting. Don Oakley, Mike Watts and Graeme Sutton are just three names there. M4 underwrites for Allianz, and Evolution also underwrites for Allianz on its motor fleet cover.

Merger time

Allianz saw the value of ex-Indie staff and recruited several of them. Peter Adlington, property and commercial reinsurance manager, and Steve Coates, head of commercial property and casualty, are just two examples. Adlington parted company with Indie in August 1998, when he was able to leave with a package to cushion the blow.

It still wasn't easy. Adlington had been reinsurance manager, but it was a time of mergers and he soon found that every company seemed to have two reinsurance managers, so he started to stress his underwriting skills.

"I had two versions of my CV; one said I was an underwriter who did reinsurance and one said I was a reinsurer who did underwriting," he says.

Adlington eventually heard that Allianz was looking for underwriters, polished his CV and got a chance to talk to Chris Hanks. That secured him a job as property manager and he has stayed with the company since.

Selection process

Coates was with Indie until "the bitter end" as he puts it. He was one of the 1,000 given just two weeks' notice on 30 June. Personal contact helped. "I knew Chris Hanks at Allianz. So I had a word with him and he fixed me up with an interview. I had to go through the interview and selection process, then the psychometrics. It's tough when you are going through redundancy. It is a human reaction to think 'will I get a job'. Eventually, I could have started the day I left Independent, but I took a month off before I did."

Coates says the reputation of Indie staff went ahead of them. "People were able to separate out the reasons why Indie failed from the rest of us who worked there. Indie did cherry-pick and recruit good people and Allianz recognised that, and has recruited ex-Indie people across the country."

Many others went off to set up their own companies. Peter Haddon runs his own recruitment consultancy, for example. Others set up together. Glynn Byrne and Andy Burke founded AGB Risk Control Services to sell their risk surveying skills to the industry. They now have five other surveyors working full-time for them plus admin staff.

"We registered the business the day before they threw us out the door," Byrne says. "We



Andy Hawkes



Steve Coates



Alan Clarke



Marc Don Francesco

to registered the business on the Thursday, got kicked out on the Friday and started looking for work on the Monday. Luckily everyone was very positive about Independent staff. Everyone felt that Indie had recruited good staff.

"Our first client was Evergreen, which is still with us, then we did some work for one or two composites. We took on our first member of staff on the admin side about October, and our first surveyor in the November."

Towergate, where Don Francesco ended up, and Fusion Insurance, which was set up in the wake of the Indie collapse in 2001, are home to several ex-Indie big hitters too. Fusion has the likes of Geoff Crisp, Stuart Pettet and Kevin Pallett, plus others. There were exceptions. A few people never did their risk surveying skills to the industry. They make it. But the majority are not just working again in the industry, but are thriving. Many are names to watch. As Clarke says: "You'll find some of these guys running the top companies in the not too distant future." **IT**

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